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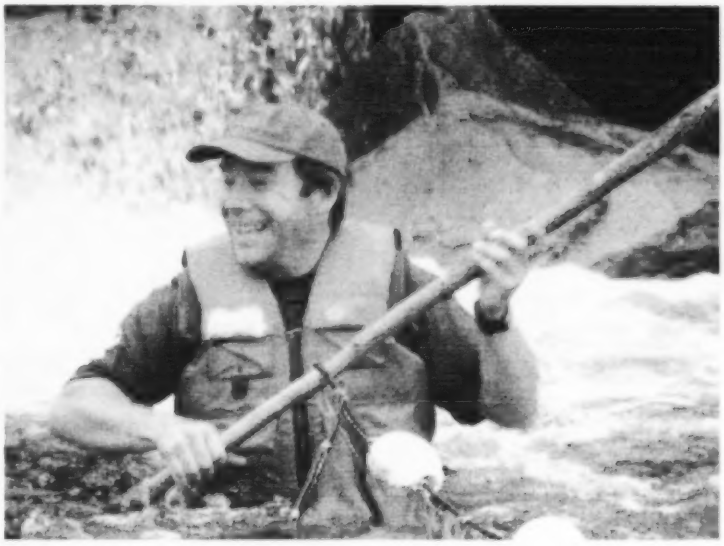
Community stewards spur action on conservation

by Claire Eamer

Last summer, Brad Wilson and several volunteers from the Alsek area spent hours carrying buckets of fish from one side of the road to the other at the Marshall Creek culvert near Haines Junction.

"They spent the whole day netting little fish and walking them to the other end of the culvert," says Jocylyn McDowell, stewardship coordinator for the Yukon Fish and Wildlife Management Board. "They saved 600 little lives in a day."



Chest-deep in Marshall Creek, Alsek community steward Brad Wilson rescues grayling blocked by a dropped culvert.

(photo: J. McDowell)

The culvert has a drop at the downstream side of the road, an impassible barrier for grayling. Wilson, the former community steward for the Alsek region, organized one-day rescue missions last year and the year before to save some of the trapped fish and to build awareness about the problem.

The awareness-building exercise worked. Yukon Community and Transportation Services, owners of the culvert, are now looking at ways to make the stream crossing more grayling-friendly.

That kind of community-based initiative, a mixture of public education and practical action, is typical of the work community stewards do, says McDowell. Their task is to help individuals, communities, and community organizations work together to conserve habitat.

The Fish and Wildlife Management Board established the community steward program after the similar but more narrowly based Habitat Conservation and Stewardship Program (HCSP), operated by the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans, ended in 2003.

The board has cobbled together funding and in-kind support from more than a dozen sources to support stewards in five communities. The largest investments

come from the Yukon River Panel and Ducks Unlimited Canada, but Renewable Resource Councils, First Nation governments, and a variety of other government and non-government bodies have contributed what they can.

There are now stewards in Haines Junction/Alsek, Dawson, Mayo, Old Crow, and Whitehorse. McDowell is the Whitehorse-area steward, as well as coordinator of the program.

What the steward does depends very much on the needs and resources of his or her community, McDowell says.

"It's a train that's already going, and these guys get on and drive for a while."

In the Alsek region, the steward has worked closely with the Renewable Resource Council, with Ducks Unlimited Canada, and with local youth in a variety of hands-on projects.

In Dawson, former steward Jake Duncan worked with Yukon College to deliver its fisheries technician course in the community on a regular basis. He also raised about $350,000 annually for community-based projects that created jobs as well as promoting conservation.

Last summer in Mayo, former steward Joella Hogan helped the Na-cho Nyak Dun First Nation organize a First Fish camp at Fraser Falls, where local children combined a camping trip with learning how to catch, clean, cook, and dry their own fish.

Beverley Brown, the former steward in Old Crow, worked with the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation and local young people to set up a recycling program. She found funds for the local manufacture of cloth shopping bags that were given away at a community dinner promoting recycling and garbage reduction. The girls who worked with her on the dinner also attended a recycling conference in Whitehorse.

"Joella and Bev both had a great capacity for drawing girls into activities," says McDowell.

The stewardship program has gone through a major changeover in the past few months, with Brad, Jake, Joella, and Bev moving on to other interests. There are now four new community stewards: Sebastian Jones in Dawson, Russell McDiarmid in Mayo, Elsabe Kloppers in Haines Junction, and Jennifer Smith in Old Crow.

McDowell says once the new stewards and their communities get to know each other, community stewards can be an important local resource.

"If they can figure each other out, there's a huge potential."

For more information about the Community Stewardship program, go to www.yfwmb.yk.ca/steward/steward.htm or phone Jocylyn McDowell at (867) 393-6942.

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